Figure 1. Amalia (María Alche) controls the desiring gaze in *La niña santa* (*The Holy Girl*, dir. Lucrecia Martel, Argentina, 2004).

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Little Red Riding Hood Meets Freud in Lucrecia Martel's Salta Trilogy

Paul A. Schroeder Rodríguez

Before the 1980s, noteworthy Latin American women directors were few and far between: Mimí Derba (codirector with Enrique Rosas of *La tigresa* [*The Tigress*, Mexico, 1917]) during the silent period; Carmen Santos (*Inconfidência Mineira* [*The Minas Conspiracy*, Brazil, 1948]) and Matilde Landeta (*La negra Angustias* [*Angustias the Black Woman*, Mexico, 1950]) during the classical period; Carmen Toscano (*Memorias de un mexicano* [*Memories of a Mexican*, Mexico, 1950], made from footage taken and collected by her deceased father, Salvador Toscano) and Margot Benacerraf (*Araya* [Venezuela, 1959]) during the transitional 1950s; and Marta Rodríguez (codirector with Jorge Silva of *Chircales* [*The Brickmakers*, Colombia, 1972]) and Sara Gómez (*De cierta manera* [*One Way or Another*, Cuba, 1976]) during the militant phase of the New Latin American Cinema. Then quite suddenly, the 1980s witnessed what Paulo Antonio Paranaguá calls a "feminization of the profession" linked to profound changes in the social status of women, broadly speaking, and, in the case of cinema, to a prolif-

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eration of film schools: CUEC (Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (1963); CERC (Centro de Experimentación y Realización Cinematográfica) at the Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía, Argentina (1965); ECA (Escola de Comunicações e Artes) at the University of São Paulo (1968); the Department of Cinema at the University of the Andes in Mérida, Venezuela (1969); the International School of Cinema and Television in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba (1986); and the Fundación Universidad del Cine, Argentina (1991).[1]

Two distinct generations of professional female directors have emerged since then. The first is loosely linked to the New Latin American Cinema. It includes Chilean director Valeria Sarmiento (*El hombre cuando es hombre* [*A Man, When He Is a Man*, France, 1982]); Brazilian directors Vera de Figueiredo (*Femenino Plural* [1976]), Ana Carolina (*Mar de rosas* [*Sea of Roses*, 1977]), Suzana Amaral (*A hora da estrela* [*Hour of the Star*, 1985]), Tizuka Yamazaki (*Gaijin, caminhos da liberdade* [*Gaijin, a Brazilian Odyssey*, 1980]), and Helena Solberg (*Carmen Miranda: Bananas Is My Business* [1994]); Mexican directors Marcela Fernández Violante (*De todos modos Juan te llamas* [*The General's Daughter*, 1974]), Busi Cortés (*El secreto de Romelia* [*Romelia's Secret*, 1988]), María Novaro (*Danzón* [1990]), and Dana Rotberg (*Ángel de fuego* [*Angel of Fire*, 1991]); and most famously, Argentinean director María Luisa Bemberg (*Camila* [1984] and *Yo, la peor de todas* [*I, the Worst of All*, 1990]). Despite its increasing prevalence, the work of this first generation of professional women filmmakers was marginal within the New Latin American Cinema, and sustained production of feature films remained an elusive goal for all but Bemberg. Today, on the other hand, women directors are at the center of a regional cinematic revival that began in the mid-1990s and continues unabated. I have explored this revival elsewhere, noting how "a new generation of filmmakers has succeeded in reinserting Latin American Cinema into the global cinematic marketplace, by appropriating some of the very conventions that the NLAC [New Latin American Cinema] rejected out of principle—for example, the use of traditional genres like melodrama or the road movie, and the unabashed use of formulaic

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identification techniques—and by redirecting the NLAC's emphasis on societies or extraordinary individuals in upheaval, focusing instead on the micropolitics of emotion."[2]

Lucrecia Martel is arguably the leading filmmaker, male or female, of this new generation, but she is far from being the only successful woman director of her generation.[3] Some of her female peers include Brazilian director Tata Amaral (*Un céu de estrelas* [*A Starry Sky*, 1997]); Mexican director Marisa Sistach (*Nadie te oye: Perfume de violetas* [*Violet Perfume: No One Is Listening*, 2001]); Argentinean directors Albertina Carri (*La rabia* [*Anger*, 2008]) and Lucía Puenzo (*XXY* [2007]); and Peruvian director Claudia Llosa (*La teta asustada* [*The Milk of Sorrow*, 2009]). What makes Martel stand out among her cohorts is not so much her critique of patriarchy's traditional gender roles and normative sexuality; these other directors also enact such critiques in their work. Rather, it is the way she delivers this critique through a multilayered and innovative cinematic language that privileges nonlinearity over causality, sound over sight, and suspense over closure.

Martel's trilogy of life in the province of Salta, Argentina, explores the country's incomplete transition to democracy from the perspective of strong, intelligent, and socially privileged female protagonists who do not conform to dominant patriarchal values: first during childhood in *La Ciénaga* (*The Swamp*, Argentina, 2001), then during sexual awakening in *La niña santa* (*The Holy Girl*, Argentina, 2004), and finally in adulthood in *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, Argentina, 2008). Because the action appears to develop in a political vacuum, the trilogy reads like a fairy tale—more specifically, like a rereading of "Little Red Riding Hood" from a feminist perspective. At the same time, however, hints that *La Ciénaga* is set in the late 1970s, *La niña santa* in the 1980s, and *La mujer sin cabeza* in the late 1990s facilitate a complementary, allegorical reading of the trilogy. In this reading, the films' protagonists serve as metaphors of Argentina's civil society in its transition from an infantilized social agent during the dictatorship in the 1970s, to the equivalent of a brazen adolescent in the early years of democracy in the 1980s, and finally, to an accommodating accomplice of neoliberalism in the 1990s.

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Entangled Narratives

Martel's films can certainly be read individually, but their full richness comes through when they are read as narratives whose protagonists are entangled in ways that are nonlinear yet measurable, like points on a string whose defining feature is female desire within patriarchy. In quantum mechanics, *entanglement* refers to the phenomenon whereby particles that are not physically connected across space can still affect one other. String theory, the best explanation so far for this phenomenon, argues that it can happen because particles are parts of the same wave, or string. It is in this sense that Martel's female protagonists are entangled: the string is the protagonists' condition as privileged, intelligent, and desiring women in patriarchy; and the particles are events and situations connected noncausally across films in the trilogy. One instance of a noncausally connected event comes early in *La Ciénaga*, when two girls sing a children's song that foreshadows the plot in *La niña santa* and even the name of one of its protagonists, Dr. Jano (Carlos Belloso):

Dr. Jano, surgeon
Today we have to operate
In the emergency room
A girl your age
She is twenty-one
You are one year older
Dr. Jano, surgeon
Don't go falling in love

Another example of entanglement is the song that plays during the closing credits of *La Ciénaga*, a *cumbia* titled "Amor divino" ("Divine Love") that references both *La Ciénaga*, whose young protagonist sublimates the love she feels toward her family's housemaid, and *La niña santa*, whose adolescent protagonist sublimates the love she feels toward Jano. The plot summaries that follow reveal further such entanglements.

La Ciénaga is a snapshot of the lives of two cousins and their families. Martel's synopsis captures the film's emphasis on tone and atmosphere over character motivation and action:

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February in the Argentine northwest. Scorching sun and tropical rain. In the jungle some areas flood into swamps that trap heavy-footed animals but shelter swarms of happy vermin. This is not a story about swamps, but about the town of La Ciénaga [The Swamp] and its environs.

Located ninety kilometers away is the town of Rey Muerto [Dead King] and close by the estate called La Mandrágora [Mandrake]. *Mandrágora* is a plant that was used as a sedative before ether and morphine replaced it, when it was necessary to bear painful experiences like an amputation. In this story it is the name of an estate where red peppers are grown and dried, and where Mecha, a fifty-something woman with four grown-up children and a husband who dyes his hair, spends her summer. All of this is worth forgetting with a couple of drinks and yet, as Tali says, alcohol enters through one door but does not leave through another.

Tali is Mecha's cousin. She also has four children, and a husband who loves his house, his children, and hunting. She lives in La Ciénaga, in a house without a pool. Two accidents will unite these two families out in the country, where they'll try to survive a summer from hell.[4]

In this living hell, Mecha (Graciela Borges) and her daughter Momi (Sofía Bertolotto) move as if they have just woken from a long sleep. Both seem to be following the trajectory of Mecha's mother, who one day decided not to leave her bed and died there many years later. Mecha's eldest son José (Juan Cruz Bordeu) is a Freudian Oedipus: he sleeps with his father's ex-lover, naps and showers with his twenty-something sister Verónica (Leonora Balcarce), and sleeps in his mother's bed, whence his father has been banished. On Tali's (Mercedes Morán) side, there are none of these rarified relationships, yet it is her son Luciano (Sebastián Montagna), the most innocent of all the characters, who dies in the end.

By cutting off the strongest affective link viewers have to the film, Luciano's death forces us to take a much more critical look at the rest of the characters. In this critical reappraisal, only Momi is worth rescuing, because she is the only character who perceives what lies beneath the thin veneer of what the camera's eye records. For example, Momi warns her mother that she will end up bedridden like Momi's grandmother, a fate that *La mujer*

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sin cabeza explores in more detail. It is also Momi who first notices that the maid Isabel (Andrea López) is pregnant. And in the closing sequence, Momi tells her sister Verónica that she went to see the apparition of the Virgin Mary that was reported on television but did not see anything. Momi's awareness, based on her own senses rather than on what others say, thus points to a way out of an otherwise oppressive and suffocating environment.

La niña santa, the next film in the trilogy, takes place almost entirely in a hotel-spa that has seen better days, during a medical congress that promises participants a mix of work and pleasure. As we will see in more detail below, it centers on the love triangle between Jano, the hotel's owner Helena (Mercedes Morán, who plays Tali in *La Ciénaga*), and Amalia (María Alche), Helena's adolescent daughter.

La mujer sin cabeza concludes the trilogy. Unlike *La Ciénaga* and *La niña santa,* which have fully developed narrative threads for three or more characters, *La mujer sin cabeza* focuses almost exclusively on Vero (María Onetto), a middle-aged dentist who bears several striking resemblances to Verónica in *La Ciénaga*. These include their names (Vero is short for Verónica), their introspective demeanors, the uncomfortably close relations that both of them sustain with physically strong men in their families, and the fact that both of their mothers at one point decided to spend the rest of their lives in bed.

In Spanish, "*sin cabeza*" refers to a mental state of having lost one's bearings, typically when falling in love. In this case, however, the title refers to Vero's having lost her bearings after accidentally hitting something—an animal, a working-class mestizo boy, or both?—with her car. Throughout the key sequence in which the accident takes place viewers see and feel what happens from Vero's perspective. We experience with her an unexpected thump, our perspective is limited to what she can see in the rear- and side-view mirrors, and we hear a 1970s pop song playing on her car radio, which suggests that in Salta, the legacy of the dictatorship is still very much alive. Rather than stop to confirm what she has hit, Vero stays in the car, and the camera stays with her, enabling viewers to study and reflect on her actions. After a long pause Vero drives off,

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and only when she is at a safe distance from the site of the accident does she stop to inspect the car and drive herself to the hospital. The rest of *La mujer sin cabeza* shows how her husband, brother, and male cousin join forces to cover up all the evidence of her hit-and-run—from the X-ray records at the hospital, to the bump in her car, to the record of her hotel stay that night. In the process, the film becomes a study on how people convince themselves of a reality that suits their interests. Herein lies the film's—and the trilogy's—political dimension, for if we can create one reality to suit one set of interests, surely we can create another reality in support of another set of interests. As Martel explains:

> In *The Headless Woman*, the mere suspicion—never confirmed—of having perhaps killed a person or a dog leads the protagonist to make a series of decisions that will mark the rest of her life. That happens a lot with oral language. I can say something—regardless of whether or not it is true—but your reaction and the emotion it generates will be real. It happens a lot in amorous relationships: when one has an argument, one says things that one may not feel, but once they're said, the other party reacts as if they were true. The person who listens to these words is the one who gives them their power, so that the consequences of words become materially real. My cinema has this political dimension. It demonstrates that one can transform the world through the combination of one's will with the will of others. Reality is something we author, not something that exists. It is something we have constructed, and if we have constructed it one way, we could also construct it some other way.[5]

Female Desire and Patriarchy as Unresolved Dialectic

As if to test how an alternative to the prevailing patriarchal reality could be constructed, each of the films in Martel's trilogy is set up as a dialectic between a desiring female subject and that reality. Aesthetically, Martel represents this dialectic by contrasting images of fluidity that are linked to female desire with images of stagnation that are linked to patriarchy. Thus spaces where air, sound, and water flow freely are linked to the unprejudiced expression of intersubjective desire, whereas stagnant air, sound, and water are linked to the suppression or the instrumentalization of desire. For

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example, in *La Ciénaga*, there is a memorable sequence in which Verónica asks a young mestizo man to take her and Momi along with him to the town's dam. In the moment of greatest narrative pleasure in the whole of the trilogy, the dam doors open and the overflowing water metaphorically washes away and visually erases class, gender, and ethnic differences. By contrast, the closing sequence of each film shows its protagonist in a tellingly stagnant setting. Momi's suppressed desire in *La Ciénaga* is visually represented by her sitting idly next to a dirty pool. Amalia's sublimated desire in *La niña santa* is underscored by her floating in the still waters of the hotel pool. Finally, in *La mujer sin cabeza*, Vero's loss of her ethical compass and her subsequent dependency on men is visually represented at the film's close when Vero, after confirming that the last bit of incriminating evidence from her car accident has been destroyed, is flanked and protected by her brother and male cousin yet trapped behind the opaque glass doors of the hotel's activity room as if in a murky pool.

These suspended narrative endings make it clear that Martel is not interested in representing a resolution to the dialectic between female desire and patriarchy. Instead, she heeds Teresa de Lauretis's call for a feminist cinema that explores the contradictions inherent in the Oedipal narrative trajectory:

> I am not advocating for the replacement or the appropriation or, even less, the emasculation of Oedipus. What I have been arguing for, instead, is an interruption of the triple track by which narrative, meaning, and pleasure are constructed from his point of view. The most exciting work in cinema and in feminism today is not anti-narrative or anti-Oedipal; quite the opposite. It is narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance, for it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario and the specific contradiction of the female subject in it, the contradiction by which historical women must work with and against Oedipus.[6]

Martel's films are, in effect, both narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance. Specifically, they explore Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex, the archetypal narrative of patriarchy, through narratives that highlight the contrast between two kinds of female desire: that which is subjected to the narrative trajectory of the

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male hero and his gaze and that which is not. This contrast is most fully developed in *La niña santa*, through a dialectic of sight and sound embodied in Helena, who willingly subjects herself to Jano's desiring gaze, and Amalia, who does not. For instance, Gonzalo Aguilar notes that Helena's hearing problems "speak of a deficiency that is compensated with visual exuberance: her image is trapped in the mirror where Jano finds her or when she dances in her bedroom. . . . Helena finds pleasure in the visual field dominated by the male gaze. Amalia, by contrast, ensconces herself in the acoustic labyrinth and uses sound, touch, and even the sense of smell to trap Jano, the man she wants to save."[7] The shots of Helena trapped in the mirror or behind glass in the hearing booth invite a reading of her character as being caught in a Lacanian mirror stage whereby her self-perception depends on external validation by male characters, whether Jano or the little boy who dances with her in the bedroom. Narratively, she is what de Lauretis calls a mainstream female character: she

> simply awaits [the hero's] return like Darling Clementine; as she indeed does in countless westerns, war, and adventure movies, providing the "love interest," which in the jargon of movie reviewers has come to denote first the singular function of the female character and then the character itself. Or she may resist confinement in that symbolic space by disturbing it, perverting it, making trouble, seeking to exceed the boundary—visually as well as narratively—as in film noir. Or again, when the film narrative centers on a female protagonist, in melodrama, in the "woman's film," etc., the narrative is patterned on a journey, whether inward or outward, whose possible outcomes are those outlined by Freud's mythical story of femininity. In the best of cases, that is, in the "happy" ending, the protagonist will reach the place (the space) where a modern Oedipus will find her and fulfill the promise of his (offscreen) journey. Not only, then, is the female position that of a given portion of the plot-space; more precisely, in cinema, it figures the (achieved) movement of the narrative toward that space. It represents narrative closure.[8]

Amalia, by contrast, is contained neither by Jano's Oedipal narrative nor by his gaze. Her desire clearly exceeds the patriarchal

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bounds of appropriate female behavior, but because she is never rewarded nor punished for it, there is no narrative closure. Here then is a film that simultaneously develops—via Helena—and counters—via Amalia—the Oedipal narrative trajectory of mainstream cinema, yet suspends any resolution. Martel, in short, does not resolve the dialectic between female desire and patriarchy in the filmic space and instead uses suspense to transfer that unresolved dialectic to the viewer.

Suspense and the Feminist Fairy Tale

Unlike horror films, which generate fear by making dangers explicit, suspense films generate anxiety by hiding dangers—whether literally, behind objects, or, more effectively, by making what is dangerous inseparable from what is not.[9] Martel uses sound very effectively to generate the anxiety that is central to suspense films by hiding and containing possible sources of looming danger. Her strategy is to create what Michel Chion calls a "phantom audio-vision," that "other side of the image" where sound sometimes goes and is "disengaged from the present."[10] Chion describes the phantom audio-vision as an effect "neither of added value nor counterpoint . . . [but rather as] a mysterious effect of 'hollowing out' of audiovisual form: as if audio and visual perceptions were divided one by the other instead of mutually compounded, and in this quotient another form of reality, of combination, emerged" (125–26). In her films, Martel privileges a subset of phantom audio-visions that Chion calls "null extension," or the shrinking of the sonic universe to the sounds heard by a single character. According to Chion, an extreme case of null extension occurs precisely

> when a sound naturally expected from a situation (which we usually hear at first) becomes suppressed, either insidiously or suddenly. This creates an impression of emptiness or mystery, most often without the spectator knowing it; the spectator feels its effect but does not consciously pinpoint its origin. . . . When the sound is removed our beholding of the image is more interrogative, as it is for silent cinema. We explore its spatial dimension more easily and spontaneously; we tend to look more actively to the image to tell us what is going on. (132)

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In the Salta trilogy, the most powerful example of a phantom audio-vision occurs early in *La mujer sin cabeza*, in the accident sequence. The sequence begins with Vero driving on a gravel road along a concrete ditch where the film earlier showed two mestizo boys and their dog playing. "Soley Soley," a 1970s pop song, is on the radio. Vero's cell phone rings, and just as she bends to reach for it, a sudden thump throws her and viewers off balance. The radio keeps playing and drowns out any sound that may come from the outside, with the effect that we engage more actively with the image in front of us: Vero looking into the car's side mirror, hesitating to get out of the car, putting on her fallen sunglasses as if they could protect her, and driving off; the accident site as seen through the car's rearview window; Vero turning off the radio; and most eerily, the marks on her side window as silent witnesses of what just happened (more on this later). Yet what viewers see, dense as it is with meaning, cannot explain the evocative power of the sequence. Only sound, or, more specifically, the use of null extension to create a phantom audio-vision, can explain this power. Thus, after the thump, the pop song is suddenly transformed into an insidious sound that transports viewers to an "other side of the image," a ghostly world that is in this case Argentina's dictatorial past—not only because the song on the radio was typical of the escapist fare favored by the military junta, but more importantly because the silenced echoes of the disembodied thump mysteriously and inexplicably reverberate in the viewer's memory in much the same way that the silenced memory of the dictatorship's victims reverberates in Argentina to this day.

Additional examples of phantom audio-visions can be found throughout the trilogy. They are especially evident whenever an ominous atmosphere crystallizes: in *La Ciénaga*, the dragging of chairs in the opening sequence, or the silence when Luciano falls near the end of the film; in *La niña santa*, Amalia's pounding on the pool's railings to catch Jano's attention, or the announcements over the speakers calling for Jano as Helena waits for him to assume his double role onstage; and in *La mujer sin cabeza*, Vero's accident sequence, or the muffled sound through the opaque doors in the final sequence. In each of these examples, effective use of null extension creates a phantom audio-vision whose strength depends

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on sound's ability to evoke a mysterious other side of the image rather than on sound's capacity to anchor the image to any specific referent.

In an interview, Martel is very explicit about why sound, so central to suspense, is for her more important than the image:

> Sound requires an elastic medium for transmission; it propagates and touches, and passes through everything that might be blocking its path. That's what we are in the movie theater, where we are touched by sound. When we watch a horror film or any other kind of film that impresses us, we can close our eyes to avoid watching a stabbing, or a shooting, or a car crash, or anything else like that. But we don't have eyelids for the ears. . . . I say this to underscore the fact that sound is the inevitable in cinema. Of course now we can lower the volume if we're watching a DVD, but that would completely transform the film. In a movie theater, however, we cannot avoid sound. . . . Sound in cinema has always been disqualified, perhaps because our society has been organized much more around visual perception.[11]

For Martel, then, visual representation is more limited than aural representation because light waves travel in direct paths and cannot traverse or travel around opaque objects as sound waves can. In *La mujer sin cabeza*'s accident sequence, for example, we hear two thumps, yet we only see one body on the road. Perhaps Vero killed not only the dog shown lying on the road as she drives off but also the dog's owner. The film never resolves this ambiguity. It does, however, point to an important consequence of the distinction between sight and sound in cinema. Conventional narrative films, centered as they are on vision, reproduce an understanding of reality as something that is static and best represented via the one-point perspective typically associated with the realist tradition. In contrast, Martel's films routinely place the camera behind or near objects that obstruct the one-point perspective. They thereby create a counterunderstanding of reality as something malleable that is best represented from multiple perspectives and, more precisely, via the multiple marginal perspectives afforded by the nooks and crannies where sound can reach but light cannot.

Martel's appreciation for sound's ability to reach beyond

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the surface of visible reality grows out of an oral storytelling tradition that is alive and well in provincial settings like Salta. In a revealing interview, Martel recounts the childhood experience of listening to her grandmother use different sounds, tones, and carefully selected pauses to tell scary stories designed to keep children immobilized while adults took their afternoon siesta:

> My grandmother loved to tell stories, and she was very good at it because she completely captured our attention. The stories she would tell us were versions of well-known stories—by the Grimm brothers, and above all, by Horacio Quiroga, an Uruguayan Argentinean writer whose feverish and wild literature takes place in Misiones, in the Argentinean Northeast, and in which there are crimes, deaths, and fantastic animals. My grandmother never told us that her stories were by a writer. I always thought that they were things that had taken place in our house. . . . The story by Quiroga that she always told us is titled "The Feather Pillow," about a woman [named Amalia] who was sick and nobody knew why. She grows increasingly weak, and when she finally dies, her husband sees on her pillow a small spot of blood, and inside a parasite that had been sucking all her blood. And then the husband kills it with an ax. I always thought that had happened to a friend of my grandmother's.[12]

"The Feather Pillow" bears noticeable similarities to the story of Little Red Riding Hood: a convalescent woman in bed, a male hero who kills a menacing creature, the striking symbolism of the color red. In Quiroga's story there is no ax: he writes only that the husband rips open the woman's pillow after her death. Martel's insertion of the ax in her retelling of the story, as well as her decision to name *La niña santa*'s protagonist "Amalia" in clear intertextual reference to Quiroga's protagonist, reveals Martel's ambitious project of rewriting "Little Red Riding Hood" so that the protagonist no longer accepts the subordinate role that patriarchy requires of her and instead claims agency over her body, her gaze, and ultimately, her life's narrative.

Why "Little Red Riding Hood"? In *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, Jack Zipes writes: "It is well known that Little Red Riding Hood in the two classical versions by Perrault and the Grimm [brothers] is not a heroine. She is more of a wimp. Either she stupidly

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agrees to an assignation with the hungry wolf and thus is complicit in her own rape/violation and death (Perrault), or she needs the help of a hunter to free her from the wolf's belly (Grimm)."[13] Zipes examines the work of female visual artists like Kiki Smith and Sharon Singer, who in the past few decades have created alternative versions of "Little Red Riding Hood." In Smith's lithograph *Born* (2002), Zipes argues, she may be asking whether women "were born with blood-red hoods and capes from wolves . . . [since] the wolf's hair appears to stream into the hairy capes and hoods of mother and daughter like blood or red flames" (143). Likewise, Singer's painting *Little Dread Riding Hood* (2005) "gives the story [of Little Red Riding Hood] a radically different slant," with a "feisty young woman with dreadlocks seemingly riding on a wolf, tamed and muzzled" (147). Martel participates in this ongoing revisionism through the representation of girls and adolescents who are not wimps, victims, or deserving of punishment and who never give up loving their mothers or other women, as required by the Oedipal trajectory, even as they partake in the privileges that patriarchy and class status offer them.

In *La niña santa*, in particular, Martel troubles the conflicted relationship between female desire and patriarchy by insistently returning to the equivalent of Red Riding Hood's encounter with the wolf in the forest. In three separate but very similar sequences, a group of people gather outside to watch a musician play a theremin, an early electronic instrument whose presence in the film underscores Martel's interest in the density of the invisible because it is played without direct physical contact. In the first sequence, Jano approaches the group of spectators, stands behind Amalia, and nonchalantly rubs his crotch against her derriere as the theremin plays an adagio. Rather than react with consternation, as one would expect, Amalia turns with curiosity to see who her molester is. Jano, startled by Amalia's response, sheepishly walks away. The second encounter begins with the theremin playing music reminiscent of science fiction B movies of the 1950s, as if cuing the spectator to a looming danger. The music quickly shifts to the melody of "Cielito lindo," a popular Mexican folk song about unrequited love, as Jano gets out of a cab and heads to the nearby

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crowd where Amalia is listening to the music with her friend Josefina (Julieta Zylberberg). The framing of the next shot leaves room for interpretation, but it seems as if Amalia turns to observe Jano molest someone else before the sequence abruptly ends. Finally, the third encounter begins with the theremin playing the habanera "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle," from Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*, to cue the spectator to the parallels between Carmen and Amalia as free-spirited women in full control of their sexuality. Indeed, the lyrics to the song provide a plausible description of Amalia's feelings at this juncture in the narrative:

Love is a rebellious bird
that nobody can tame,
and you call him quite in vain
if it suits him not to come
. . . . . .
Love is a gypsy's child,
it has never, ever, known a law;
love me not, then I love you;
if I love you, you'd best beware!

Unaware of Amalia's presence, Jano approaches the crowd and stands behind a young woman. Amalia then surreptitiously eases herself in front of Jano, who proceeds to rub himself against her. The next shot, a profile of the two at waist level, shows Amalia reaching back with her hand to touch Jano. Surprised, he jolts and turns to walk away, but not before Amalia locks eyes with him (fig. 1).

This last encounter shatters the entrenched filmic tradition that defines sexual desire through the male gaze. It also explicitly subverts the traditional masculine narrative trajectory, represented by Jano's relationship with Helena, by privileging an alternative narrative of female desire centered on how Amalia desires Jano in ways that are not dependent on his narrative or his desires. In the end, when Amalia finally realizes that Jano rejects her because she escapes his control, she sublimates her desire as a divine calling: Jano is a good man who has sinned and must be saved, hence the film's title. However, because Amalia ultimately sacrifices her

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Figure 2. In *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, dir. Lucrecia Martel, Argentina, 2008), as Vero (María Onetto) struggles to exit her car, the handprint on the car window is that of a child.

own desires for the sake of Jano's male privilege, she embodies the contradictions and complexities of the dialectic between female desire and patriarchy: she becomes a wickedly innocent she-wolf who simultaneously subverts and reproduces traditional gender and social relations.

The comparison to an animal is relevant because it points to the trilogy's links to the fable, a short narrative form that, according to Annabel Patterson,

> speaks to unequal power relations and prompts those without power to speak in metaphoric codes that can emancipate both the teller and the listener. Fables do not always end happily even when there is a resolution or a moral. They move readers and listeners to contemplate how they might act if they were in a similar situation. . . . The listener and reader of a fable are always given a choice, and human agency is thus respected. Fables tell us that we all have choices to make.[14]

Fables and fairy tales differ in form, especially in length and degrees of realism, yet both share a preoccupation with moral choices. This similarity leads us to the most important character in Martel's films: ourselves.

Consider, for example, the marks on Vero's side window as she drives away from the scene of the accident in *La mujer sin*

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Figure 3. After Vero has made the fateful decision to leave the scene of the accident, the child's handprint changes to look like the mark of a canine. *La mujer sin cabeza*

cabeza. Are they human? Are they animal? In fact, they are both. In the first shot of the sequence, they are clearly human (fig. 2). Then, after a very short second shot that shows viewers the scene of the accident through the car's rear window, a third shot once again frames Vero in profile, but the mark now looks canine, not human (fig. 3). Could this change in the physiology of the marks indicate a change in Vero as well? Might Vero be like a Red Riding Hood who has just made the fateful decision to abandon the wolves she used to run with, to paraphrase the title of Clarissa Pinkola Estés's popular book on the wild woman archetype?[15]

By privileging ambiguity around the marks' origins and around whether or not Vero killed the boy in addition to the dog, and through open endings that force us to ask ourselves what we would do in similar situations, Martel implicates her viewers in the moral conundrums her characters face. Like fables, then, Martel's films ask the most difficult of questions: How would we act in situations like these, where our baser instincts push us in one direction and our ethical compasses in another? Should Jano, for example, be stripped of his medical license for being a sexual predator? Asked in this manner, the answer seems straightforward: he should lose his license. As we continue to watch the film, however, we find ourselves torn between hoping for this execution of justice and

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hoping Jano will not be punished, for the sake of his family and his career.

Understandably, we repress the feelings of guilt that develop when we identify with characters whose behavior is unethical. However, unlike most suspense films, where the danger is made explicit in the end and the spectator does not have to answer for his or her unethical wishes, Martel's films force us to confront and examine such wishes by denying narrative closure and thereby highlighting the idea, central to fables and fairy tales, that there is always a choice to be made, whether by the characters on-screen or by viewers in similar situations. In *La niña santa*, Jano may or may not be accused of child molestation; more important is what the viewer wants for Jano and why. This kind of unresolved ethical dilemma also defines the closing sequence of *La mujer sin cabeza*, which shows Vero reaping the benefits of patriarchal privilege afforded her by playing the part of female object of desire for both her husband and her cousin. Here then is where Little Red Riding Hood and Oedipus meet, at the accident-prone and ethically muddy intersection between female desire and patriarchal privilege.

The Salta Trilogy as Feminist Critique of the Patriarchal State

The action in Martel's Salta trilogy appears to develop in a temporal vacuum, as in a fairy tale. The technological objects that appear in the films, however, suggest an approximate time frame. The models of the phones, cars, and television sets in *La Ciénaga* suggest that the action takes place during the last years of Argentina's military dictatorship, in the late 1970s; in *La niña santa*, a coin-operated photocopier in a local shop suggests that the action is set during Raúl Alfonsín's presidency, in the mid-1980s; and in *La mujer sin cabeza*, the use of cell phones and color home videos anchors the action in the late 1990s, during Carlos Menem's presidency. This rough time frame enables a reading of the protagonists as metaphors of Argentina's civil society in its turbulent coming-of-age from the military dictatorship of the 1970s through the populist neoliberalism of the 1990s. The

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trilogy in this regard is a study of Martel's own generation. Born in 1966, Martel would have been Momi's age during the dictatorship, Amalia's age during the first years of democratic rule, and younger than Vero, but an adult nevertheless, during the height of neoliberalism and the Washington Consensus in the 1990s. In this multigenerational story, the double status of strong, intelligent, and socially privileged women as simultaneously courted and contained by patriarchy parallels the double status of Argentina's civil society as simultaneously courted and contained by the patriarchal state. Thus the unresolved dialectic between female desire and patriarchy that Martel's protagonists embody is analogous to the unresolved dialectic between civil society's desire for freedom and the patriarchal state's containment of that freedom during key moments in Argentina's recent history.

For example, insofar as Momi represents the generation that grew up under the military regime, her final words to her sister Verónica about not seeing the image of the Virgin that many claimed to have seen represent her generation's potential to think for itself rather than accepting what the mass media and the interests that drive them tell it to think and believe. However, Momi's potential remains unrealized. Her moment of greatest awareness comes at a moment of personal crisis, when she must come to terms with a pregnant Isabel's decision to leave the household. At this critical juncture, when Momi should give Isabel her full moral support, her choice to reproduce her mother's racist and classist behavior toward the vulnerable housemaid indicates that Momi's psychosexual development has stagnated like everyone else's. As spectators, we may wish for Momi's assertion that she did not see the Virgin to mean that she has broken through this stagnation. That potential meaning is, however, countered by Momi's behavior toward Isabel as well as by the closing shot of the two sisters lounging by the pool just as their parents lounged, stagnating, in the opening sequence. *La Ciénaga* thus ends with Momi stuck in the equivalent of Freud's latent stage—sexually unfulfilled and unable to grow beyond her fixation on Isabel—a situation that parallels the predicament of Argentina's latent civil society during the last years of the dictatorship, when a clean break with the military was

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as unlikely as Momi charting a radically different course from that of her family.

In *La niña santa*, by contrast, Amalia's boundless sexual desire is analogous to civil society's boundless political desire for freedom when democratic rule returned to Argentina in the 1980s. In this reading, Jano embodies the gender, class, and racial privileges so earnestly protected under the dictatorship, while Amalia embodies civil society's highest aspirations for freedom and even reconciliation. Amalia, after all, not only desires Jano but also sees it as her mission to bring him back into the fold of society by forgiving him, which she does in a tender sequence where she insists to him that he is a "good man." In the end, however, Amalia floats in the pool, its still waters signaling that she has contained her own desires for the sake of Jano's privileges. What's more, Amalia floats next to Josefina, who hypocritically tells Amalia that she will always protect her when in fact she has just betrayed her to save her own skin. Viewers' knowledge of Josefina's duplicity facilitates a reading of this closing sequence as an indictment of the many times that Argentinean civil society has been betrayed by those who claim to be looking after its interests when in fact they are looking after their own.

Finally, in the closing sequence of *La mujer sin cabeza*, the enclosed space of the hotel's activity room seems to give the film narrative closure (fig. 4). In so doing it parallels Menem's 1990 presidential pardon of crimes committed by high officials in the military during Argentina's Dirty War in the 1970s, a pardon that Menem justified as a necessary condition for national reconciliation. Like Menem, Vero justifies the suppression of truths that threaten the Oedipal trajectory toward closure—over and above the ethical course of investigating committed crimes—in order to secure the class privilege that she clearly enjoys and that patriarchy protects. Yet this closure is only apparent because the opaque glass doors that lead to the hotel's activity room call attention to the fact that we can still see through the lies that sustain impunity for those who committed crimes against humanity during the Dirty War. Moreover, the fact that the doors are made of glass implies that this impunity can always shatter, as it in fact did when the Argentinean

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Supreme Court overturned Menem's pardons in 2007. For many, the process of Argentina's facing up to its criminal past culminated in the moment when the notorious general Jorge Rafael Videla, a leader of the junta, was sentenced to life in prison in 2010 and died there, to little fanfare, in 2013. What *La mujer sin cabeza* suggests, however, is that Argentina's culture of impunity is very much alive and will remain so as long as the dialectic between female desire and patriarchy is skewed in favor of the latter.

Conclusion

Because Martel cleverly uses suspense, a widely recognizable and popular narrative form, and because she subtly explores the ongoing conflict between female desire and patriarchy that transcends national contexts, her films have traveled well beyond Argentina, collecting nominations and awards from all the major festivals in Latin America and the North Atlantic, from Cannes to Sundance and from Buenos Aires to Havana. At the same time, however, her films are finely tuned to the particular rhythms and values of provincial middle-class Argentina, a world whose economic stagnation and moral bankruptcy Martel dissects through narratives that play on viewers' sympathies by constantly shifting between favorable and unfavorable perspectives on her characters. This constant shifting of perspectives facilitates a critical reading in which desire for freedom, whether sexual or political, is not an abstraction but rather something concretely anchored in a specific place with a century-long history of decadence, authoritarianism, and impunity. Provincial Argentina, to be more exact, is the specific context in which, as the titles of the trilogy suggest, desire for freedom is habitually sublimated, truncated, and left to stagnate. Yet like every good fairy tale, the moral of Martel's trilogy is not limited in reference to one place. Indeed, it can readily be applied to other contexts, Latin American and otherwise, where civil societies still struggle to chart a course where neither patriarchy nor impunity is justified as a necessary condition for social stability and national reconciliation.

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Notes

All translations from Spanish-language sources are my own.

1. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, *Tradición y modernidad en el cine de América Latina* (Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica de España, 2003), 247–50.

2. Paul A. Schroeder Rodríguez, "After New Latin American Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012): 108.

3. In a recent survey, three of Martel's feature films made it to a list of the ten best Latin American films of the first decade of this century. Martel was the only director to have more than one film on this list, and she was also the only woman on it, yet none of this was highlighted in the survey's press release. This signals a tacit acknowledgment that in Latin America today it is not out of the ordinary for a leading filmmaker to be a woman. See "The Ten Best Latin American Films of the Decade," IFC Center, www.ifccenter.com/series/the-ten-best-latin-american-films-of-the-decade (accessed 12 February 2013).

4. Lucrecia Martel, quoted in David Oubiña, *Estudio crítico sobre "La Ciénaga"* (Buenos Aires: Picnic, 2007), 15.

5. Lucrecia Martel, interview by Haden Guest, *BOMB*, no. 106 (2009), bombmagazine.org/article/3231/lucrecia-martel.

6. Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 590.

7. Gonzalo Aguilar, *Otros mundos: Un ensayo sobre el nuevo cine argentino*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Santiago Arcos, 2010), 101.

8. De Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," 584.

9. Freud was clear about the distinction between fear and anxiety. Anxiety, he wrote, "has a quality of indefiniteness and lack of object. In precise speech we use the word 'fear' rather than 'anxiety' if [the danger] has found an object." Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, trans. Alex Strachey (New York: Norton, 1959), 90–91.

10. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 123, 124.

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11. Lucrecia Martel, "El sonido en la escritura," *Casamérica*, 28 October 2009, www.casamerica.es/temastv/el-sonido-en-la-escritura.

12. Martel, interview by Guest.

13. Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 143.

14. Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), quoted in Zipes, *Irresistible Fairy Tale*, 13.

15. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine, 1992).

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Figure 4. In the end, viewers' perception of Vero's impunity is as fragile and opaque as the glass doors that visually entrap her within patriarchy. *La mujer sin cabeza*

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